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SUBJECT: THAILAND POLITICAL UPDATE - DECEMBER 14, 2006

Classified By: Political Counselor Susan M. Sutton, Reason 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (U) SUMMARY. The National People's Assembly will convene on December 18, beginning what some complain to be a long and complicated process to select the final 35 drafters of the new Constitution. Some Thai academics and activists have also expressed concern about the influence the Council for National Security (CNS) exerts over the process. Separately, a highly-anticipated demonstration against the coup on December 10 failed to draw out the large crowd that many, including the CNS, predicted. End summary.

#### NATIONAL PEOPLE'S ASSEMBLY FORMED

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12. (SBU) The King has officially appointed 1,982 persons as members of the National People's Assembly (NPA). Our sources tell us the NPA will hold its opening ceremony on Sunday, December 17, with Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn presiding. The NPA should then convene on December 18 in order to begin selecting 200 prospective members of the Constitution Drafting Assembly (CDA). According to the interim constitution, the 200 figures must be selected within one week of the first NPA meeting. Subsequently, the Council for National Security (CNS) will select 100 of the 200 for membership in the CDA. There is no deadline in the interim constitution for the CNS's selection, but we expect it to take place relatively quickly. The CDA will have 180 days to complete the draft constitution, starting from the date of its first meeting.

13. (C) Many of our contacts have expressed disdain for the NPA's elaborate winnowing ritual, which does not disguise the enormous influence the CNS will exert over the composition of the CDA (as well as the 35-member Constitution Drafting Committee, which will do most of the real work). Many politicians assert that prominent jurist Meechai Ruchupan, who was close to the coup leaders and became President of the National Legislative Assembly, has already begun sketching out key elements of the draft constitution. Nevertheless, we doubt that the CNS will be able to control public discourse once the CDA begins its work; activists and some political party officials have begun preparing proposals for the next charter, and we expect active participation by civil society.

14. (C) On December 13, Prime Minister Surayud Chulanont, publicly addressed rumors that the current leadership of Thailand would like for the next constitution to allow for persons other than members of parliament to become Prime Minister. Surayud said this issue should be settled after public discussion. Multiple contacts from political parties have told us with confidence that a system that permits a non-member of parliament to become Prime Minister would encounter strong opposition from civil society.

DEMONSTRATION TAKES PLACE IN BANGKOK  
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15. (SBU) On December 10, to mark Thailand's Constitution Day, various groups converged on Bangkok's Royal Grounds (Sanam Luang) for a peaceful pro-democracy rally. According to press reports, approximately 1,000 people participated, although some pre-rally projections estimated tens of thousands might attend. Prior to the event, top military officers warned publicly that those joining in the demonstration would be disregarding the King's call for national unity. The press also reported efforts by security and government officials to dissuade people outside of Bangkok from coming to the event. Thaksin associates, such as former cabinet member Newin Chidchob, were alleged to have provided backing for the event. Organizers included three activist groups established in late 2006 to protest against the September 19 coup d'etat. Security forces -- both police and military -- had a heavy presence at the event, according to the media.

HANSEN